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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the Invitational Learning model developed by William W. Purkey, an approach that emphasizes mutual respect and human potential in every aspect of schooling. It presents a brief overview of the invitational learning concept and discusses the theoretical foundations of the model. It describes characteristics of an inviting school, inviting school policies and programs, inviting behavior in the classroom, and the invitational approach to school counseling. Advice is provided for incorporating the invitational model among principals, teachers, and counselors. (TE)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Invitational Learning for Counseling and Development

Overview

Schools, like individuals, have "personalities"; these self-validating and self-reinforcing characteristics do much to shape students' experience of school and their attitudes toward learning. If the general tone of a school is hostile, mistrustful, or forbidding, students are likely to become alienated and discouraged, despite the best efforts of individual teachers and counselors. Conversely, if a school is cheerful, respectful, and inviting toward both students and parents, and if this inviting manner is manifest in every detail of instruction, program design, policy, staff behavior, and decor, students will likewise respond accordingly, and their experience of school will be rewarding and memorable. This is the basic idea behind the concept of Invitational Learning.

What Is Invitational Learning?

Invitational Learning is a remarkably direct but evocative model of schooling developed by William W. Purkey. The aim, as Purkey says, is to make school "the most inviting place in town" by emphasizing mutual respect and human potential in every aspect of schooling—people, places, policies, and programs. The invitational approach to education is predicated on four fundamental assumptions:

- that people are able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly;
- that education should be a collaborative, cooperative activity, involving all participants—teachers, students, and parents—in all decisions which affect them;
- that people possess untapped potential in all aspects of human endeavor; and
- that human potential can best be realized by places, policies, and processes that are specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally.

Inviting schools, then, are places where students feel welcome, appreciated, and encouraged to realize their potential and to respect the unique worth of themselves and others.

Theoretical Foundations

The invitational approach to education derives from two theoretical perspectives: perceptual psychology and self-concept theory. The perceptual tradition sees behavior as a function of the individual's perceived world. Individuals are viewed as conscious agents who perceive, consider, interpret, and then act on the basis of their own experience, and who are ultimately responsible for their own actions.

Self-concept consists of each person's unique system of perceptions about the self in relation to one's environment. A person seeks to maintain a consistent self-concept by assimilating or rejecting perceptions that do or do not fit preconceptions, but a person's self-concept can change and develop as a result of inviting or encouraging acts.

If educators are to create inviting schools, they must identify those elements in the school environment that will interact with students' perceptions in ways that continually foster a healthy self-concept in students. Every part of the environment, the program and policies, and the approach to instruction must be designed to promote a sustaining belief in the value and unique potential of each person.

The Inviting School

The physical environment of a school can have a dramatic effect on the attitudes of counselors, teachers and students toward education and toward each other. If windows are broken, paint is peeling, hallways are littered, walls are covered with graffiti, classrooms dusty, and restrooms smelly, students can hardly be blamed for concluding that no one cares about them—and they will act accordingly. Conversely, if a school is tidy, well-maintained, brightly lit, and freshly painted, and if grass is mowed, bushes trimmed, flowers planted, and walkways clean, students are far more likely to feel a sense of pride in their school and in themselves.

Other ways to make your school building more inviting include signs and posters that welcome visitors and offer validating messages to students, bulletin boards that advertise school activities and events, and display cases that exhibit student accomplishments or artistic works.

Inviting School Policies and Programs

School policies—the rules, codes, and procedures used to regulate ongoing functions such as discipline, personnel selection, bus routes, attendance, and visitation procedures—can send a powerful message to people in the school and the community about whether or not people are seen as able, valuable, and responsible. Often, policies that may seem sensible and efficient to those who make them may be experienced as insensitive, degrading, or demoralizing by those effected.

Policies should therefore be framed with an eye not only toward the smooth and efficient functioning of the school, but also toward the convenience, self-respect, and dignity of teachers, counselors and students.

The academic program can likewise convey strong messages about a school's attitude toward students. Often, programs with good intentions are harmful to individuals because they focus on narrow goals and neglect human

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needs. For example, programs that group students according to ability may be highly beneficial for students labeled as "gifted," but this same labeling process may wreak long-term psychological damage on those who are stigmatized (and thus perceive themselves) as "slow." The invitational model requires educators to assess the effects of programmatic decisions on the human needs and self-esteem of everyone affected by those decisions.

Inviting Behavior in the Classroom

As Purkey notes, Invitational Learning is "as much an attitudinal disposition as a methodology." Teachers and counselors who accept the assumptions of the invitational model conduct all of their teaching and counseling activities and their relationships with the students on the basis of trust, respect, intentionality and optimism.

The Inviting School Counselor

According to Purkey, counselors can operate at four levels of inviting or disinviting:

- **Intentionally disinviting**—counselors who deliberately attempt to make students feel incapable, worthless, and irresponsible.
- **Unintentionally disinviting**—counselors who "have their hearts in the right place" but whose counseling methods contradict their good intentions by inadvertent discouraging messages conveyed through labeling or stereotyping, nonverbal signals, or other means.
- **Unintentionally inviting**—counselors who are "naturals," but who are unaware of the nature and good effects of their behavior. Because they do not see the sources of their successes and failures, such counselors are often blocked from professional development, and they often lack the consistent pattern of behavior middle school students need in order to formulate their own identities.
- **Intentionally inviting**—counselors who explicitly invite students, teachers, administrators, and parents and are able to adjust and evaluate their invitations as necessary. The goal of most counselors, of course, is to be intentionally inviting as much as possible. The intentionally inviting counselor makes a determined effort to make the school an inviting place that stresses the importance and uniqueness of students, encourages parental involvement in the school, and nurtures the creativity of teachers. The intentionally inviting counselor: listens with care, acts "real" with students, possesses self-understanding and self-acceptance, handles rejection well, and effectively manages stress.

The inviting school counselor also offers concrete humanistic behaviors to assist students to feel adequate as learners by nurturing the following skills in students: **relating** (with school, teachers, classmates, and the opposite sex), **asserting** (developing a sense of control over what happens in the classroom), **investing** (willingness to try new things, to explore new possibilities, and to make mistakes), and **coping** (meeting school expectations).

The counselor's role in the school can be viewed as the delivery of direct invitational services to students and staff and the humanizing of the school atmosphere. The counselor proceeds in such a manner that students, staff, and the counselor feel worthwhile, capable, and responsible.

Where Do We Start?

It is not always easy to transform a school into an inviting place that respects individuality, that nurtures curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and that fosters dignity and responsibility. Institutional bad habits can be as difficult to break as personal bad habits. But the process begins with individuals—with principals, teachers and counselors.

Principals can initiate the process of change by establishing a clear set of goals based on the invitational model. Next, a three-to-five year plan can be instituted to achieve these goals. Renovation of the physical plan should come first, since this establishes an appropriate setting for the transformations that follow—in policies, programs, and practices. Principals should also model the behavior they expect of teachers and counselors in their own interactions with staff and students.

The ultimate responsibility for the success of an invitational model, however, lies with teachers and counselors themselves. Purkey has developed a systematic plan he calls the "Four Corner Press" through which teachers and counselors can develop an inviting attitude that pervades everything they do. The four "corners" are as follows:

- being personally inviting with one's self
- being personally inviting with others
- being professionally inviting with one's self
- being professionally inviting with others

The underlying notion behind this approach is that to be successful, teachers and counselors must develop an authentically inviting attitude, toward themselves and others, both inside and outside of school. They should lead lively and interesting lives, be fully engaged both personally and professionally in their job, and support and encourage both students and colleagues in everything they do.

Resources

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